

# Trump's budget policy: Mortgaging the future?

By [Christophe Blot](#)

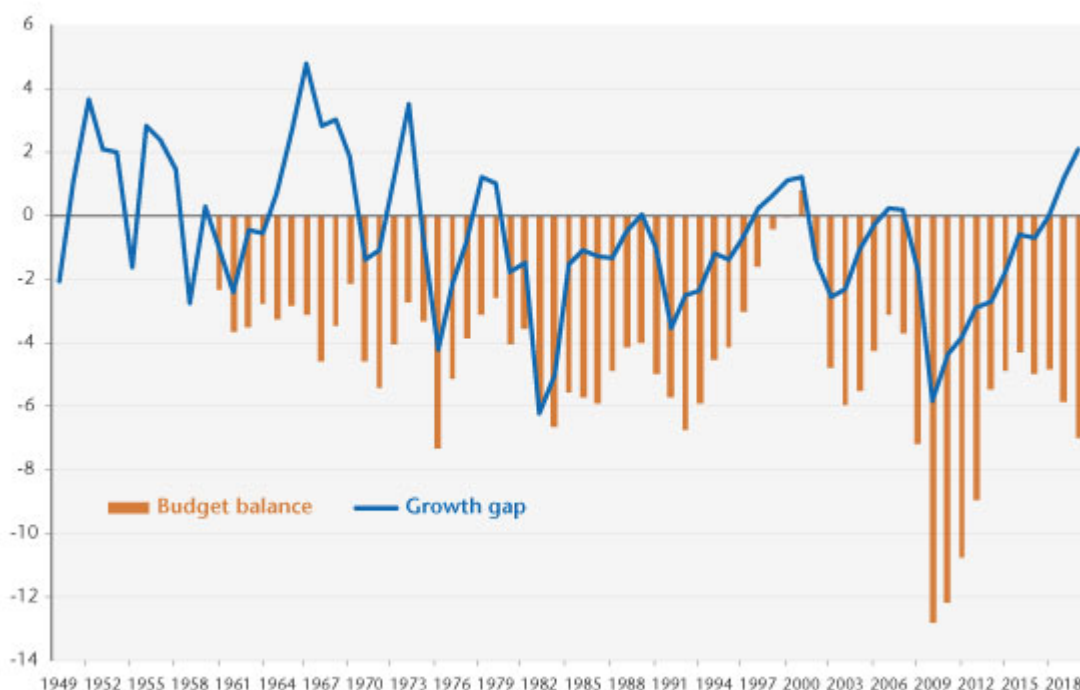
While the momentum for growth has lost steam in [some countries](#) – Germany, France and Japan in particular – GDP in the United States is continuing to rise at a steady pace. Growth could even pick up pace in the course of the year as a highly expansionary fiscal policy is implemented. In 2018 and 2019, the fiscal stimulus approved by the Trump administration – in December 2017 for the revenue component, and in February 2018 for the expenditure side – would amount to 2.9 GDP points. This level of fiscal impulse would come close to that implemented by Obama for 2008. However, Trump's choice has been made in a very different context, since the unemployment rate in the United States fell back below the 4% mark in April 2018, whereas it was accelerating 10 years ago, peaking at 9.9% in 2009. The US economy should benefit from the stimulus, but at the cost of accumulating additional debt.

Donald Trump had made fiscal shock one of the central elements of his presidential campaign. Work was begun in this direction at the beginning of his mandate, and came to fruition in December 2017 with the passing of a major tax reform, the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act [\[1\]](#), which provided for a reduction in household income tax – in particular by reducing the maximum marginal income tax rate – and corporation tax, whose effective rate would fall from 21% to 9% by 2018 [\[2\]](#). In addition to this initial stimulus, expenditure will also rise in accordance with the agreement reached with the Democrats in February 2018, which should lead to [raising federal spending](#) by USD 320 billion (1.7 GDP points) over two years. These choices will push up domestic demand through boosting household disposable income and corporate profitability, which should stimulate consumption and investment. The multiplier

effect – which measures the impact on GDP of a one dollar increase in public spending or a one dollar cut in taxes – will nevertheless be relatively small (0.5) because of the US position in the cycle.

Moreover, the public deficit will expand sharply, to reach a historically high level outside a period of crisis or war (graph). It will come to 5.8% of GDP in 2018 and 7.0% in 2019, while the growth gap will become positive [\[3\]](#). While the risk of overheating seems limited in the short term, the fact remains that the fiscal strategy being implemented could push the Federal Reserve to tighten monetary policy more quickly. However, an excessive rise in interest rates in a context of high public debt would provoke a snowball effect. Above all, by choosing to re-launch the economy in a favourable environment, the government risks being forced to make adjustments later when the economic situation deteriorates. This pro-cyclical stance in fiscal policy risks amplifying the cycle by accelerating growth today while taking the risk of accentuating a future slowdown. With a deficit of 7% in 2019, fiscal policy's manoeuvring room will actually shrink.

Figure. A pro-cyclical budget policy



Sources: CBO and NIPA, OFCE April 2018 forecasts.

[1] See the section on Budget policy: Crisis-free acceleration [“Politiques budgétaires : accélération sans crise”] in our [April 2017 forecast](#) for greater detail.

[2] See [here](#) for more on this.

[3] The growth gap expresses – as a % of potential GDP – the difference between observed GDP and potential GDP. Recall that potential GDP is not observed but estimated. The method of calculation used by the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) is explained [here](#).

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## Italy: The horizon seems to be clearing

By [Céline Antonin](#)

With growth in Italy of 0.4% in the third quarter of 2017 (see **table** below), the country’s economy seems to have recovered and is benefiting from the more general recovery in the euro zone as a whole. The improvement in growth is linked to several factors: first, the continued closing of the output gap, which had worsened sharply after a double recession (2008-2009 and 2012-2013). In addition, the expansionary fiscal policy in 2017 (+0.3 fiscal impulse), mainly targeted at businesses, and thriving consumption driven by expanding employment and rising wages explain this good performance. The increase in employment is the result of the reduction in social contributions that began in 2015 as well as the pick-up

in growth in 2016 and 2017.

Despite all this, Italy remains the “sick man” of the euro zone: GDP in volume is still more than 6% below its pre-crisis level, and the recovery is less solid than for its euro zone partners. Furthermore, the public debt, now over 130%, has not yet begun to fall, potential growth remains sluggish (0.4% in 2017), and the banking sector is still fragile, as is evidenced by recent bank recapitalizations, in particular the rescue of the Monte dei Paschi di Siena bank (see below).

In 2018-2019, Italy's growth, while remaining above potential, should slow down. Indeed, fiscal policy will be neutral and growth will be driven mainly by domestic demand. Unemployment will fall only slowly, as the employment support measures implemented in 2017 wind down and productivity returns to its trend level [\[1\]](#) over the forecasting horizon (see [OFCE, La nouvelle grande modération \[in French\], p. 71](#)). Furthermore, the banking sector will continue its long and difficult restructuring, which will hold back the granting of bank loans.

In the third quarter of 2017, the contribution of domestic demand to growth (consumption and investment) reached 0.8 point, but massive destocking attenuated the impact on growth (-0.6 point). Gross Fixed Capital Formation (GFCF) leapt 3% in the third quarter of 2017, returning to its 2012 level, thanks to a strong increase in the productive sector (machinery, equipment and transport). Private consumption, the other pillar of domestic demand, grew on average by 0.4% per quarter between the first quarter of 2015 and the third quarter of 2017, thanks to falling unemployment and a reduction in precautionary savings. Credit conditions have improved slightly due to the quantitative easing policy pursued by the ECB, even though the channel for the transmission of monetary policy is suffering from the difficulties currently hitting the banking sector.

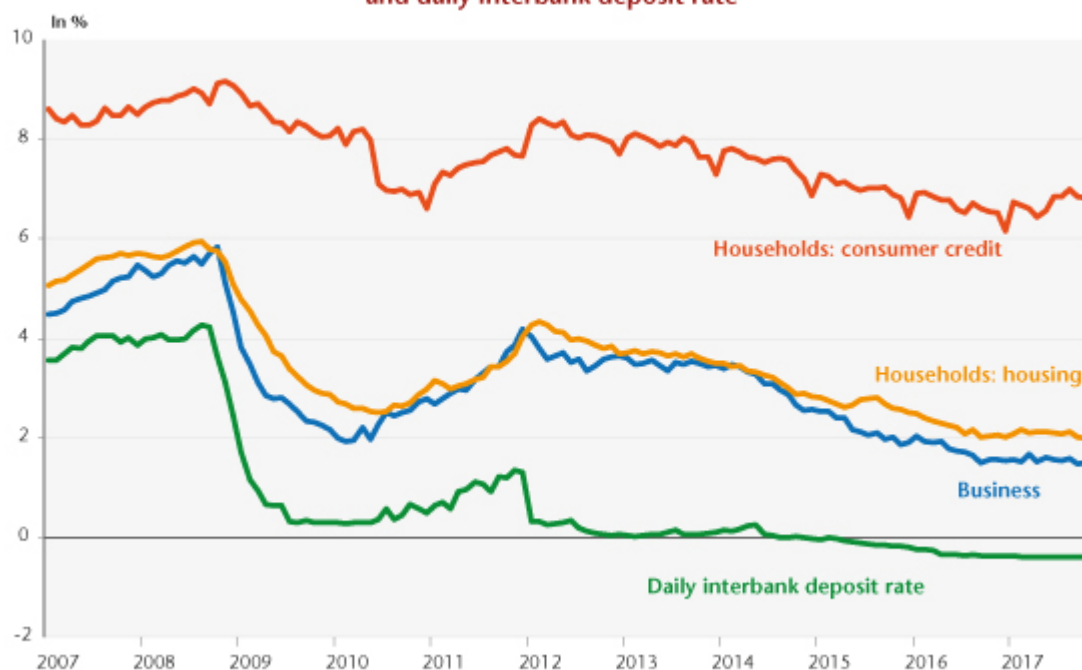
The number of people in employment rose to 23 million in the second quarter of 2017, back to its pre-crisis level, while the unemployment rate is declining only slowly due to the steady increase in the labour force [\[2\]](#). Job creation did indeed take place between 2014 and 2017 (around 700,000 jobs created, 450,000 of them permanent), mainly due to the lowering of charges on new hires in 2015 and 2016 and the resumption of growth. Moreover, according to INPS figures, the number of new hires on permanent contracts decreased (between January-September 2016 and January-September 2017) by -3.1%, as did conversions from temporary contracts to fixed-term contracts (-10.2%), while the numbers of new hires on temporary contracts exploded (+ 27.3%): in other words, it is mainly precarious contracts that are currently contributing to job growth. From 2018, the pace of job creation is expected to decline due to the winding down of the measures cutting employer social contributions (which represented a total of 3 billion euros) and the slowdown in economic growth. This underpins a forecast of a very slow decline in unemployment: employment is expected to rise more slowly in 2018 and 2019, but the labour force is also growing more slowly, due to a bending effect, a distortion linked to the slowdown in job creations and the retirement of the baby boom generation.

The productivity cycle in Italy is still in poor shape, despite the downward revision of the productivity trend (-1.0% for the period 2015-2019). The measures taken to cut social security contributions over the 2015-2016 period will have enriched employment growth by 27,000 jobs per quarter (extrapolating the estimates by [Sestito and Viviano, Bank of Italy](#)). Our hypothesis was for a closure of the productivity cycle over the forecast horizon, with productivity picking up pace in 2018 and 2019 [\[3\]](#).

Moreover, the productive investment rate recovered strongly in the third quarter of 2017: it should continue to rise in 2018 and 2019, thanks in particular to a higher pace of extra-

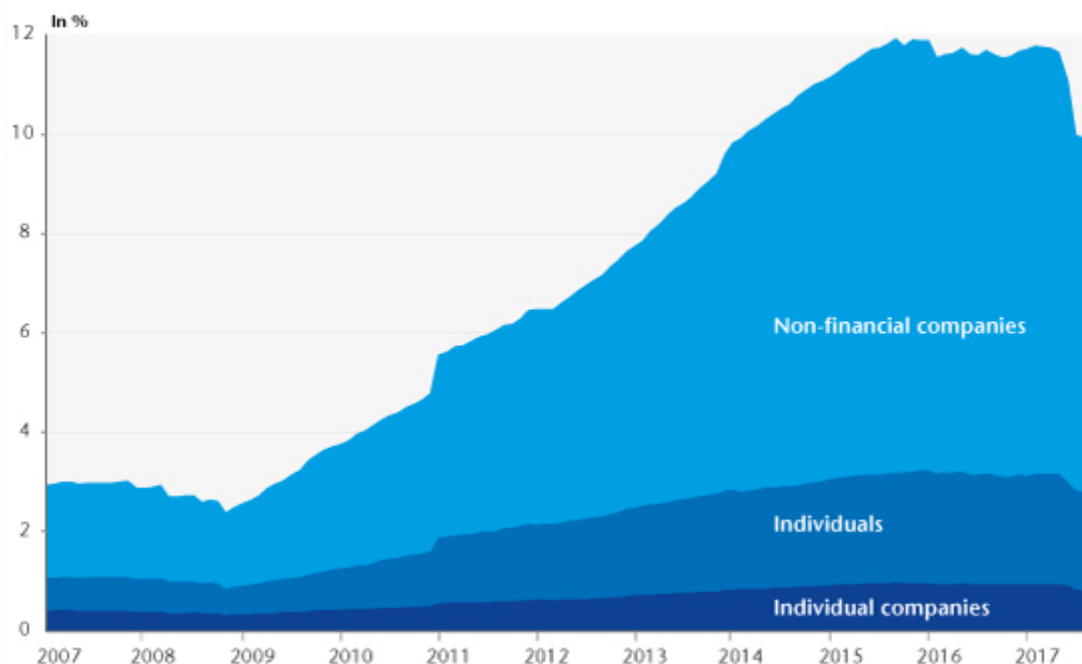
depreciation, to the ECB's quantitative easing programme and to clearing up the situation of the banks, which should allow a better transmission of monetary policy (**Figure 1**). In addition, the amount of bad debt (*sofferenze*) began to fall sharply (down 30 billion euros between January and October, 2 GDP points – **Figure 2**). This is linked to the gradual restructuring of bank balance sheets and the economic recovery in certain sectors, particularly construction, which accounts for 43% of business bad debt.

**Figure 1. Interest rates on new loans to households and business and daily interbank deposit rate**



Source: Bank of Italy.

Figure 2. Bad debt (*sofferenze*) as a share of GDP



Sources: Istat, Bank of Italy.

In 2017, it was domestic demand that was driving growth; the contribution of foreign trade was zero because of the dynamism of imports and the absence of any improvement in price competitiveness. We anticipate that the contribution of foreign trade will be null in 2018 and slightly positive in 2019 thanks to an improvement in competitiveness (Table).

Fiscal policy was expansionary in 2017 (+0.3 point impulse) and supported growth. This has mainly benefited business: support for the world of agriculture, extra-depreciation, the reduction of the corporate tax rate (IRES) from 27.5% to 24% in 2017, a boost in the research tax credit, etc. 2018 should not see a noticeable increase in taxation, and spending is expected to increase slightly (0.3%). The additional public expenditure should reach 3.8 billion euros, for: youth bonuses (youth employment measures), prolongation of extra-depreciation in industry, the renewal of civil service contracts and the fight against poverty. As for public revenue, the government has ruled out a VAT hike that would have brought in 15.7 billion euros; the adjustment will therefore come from a smaller reduction in the deficit and an increase in revenue (5 billion euros forecast). To boost

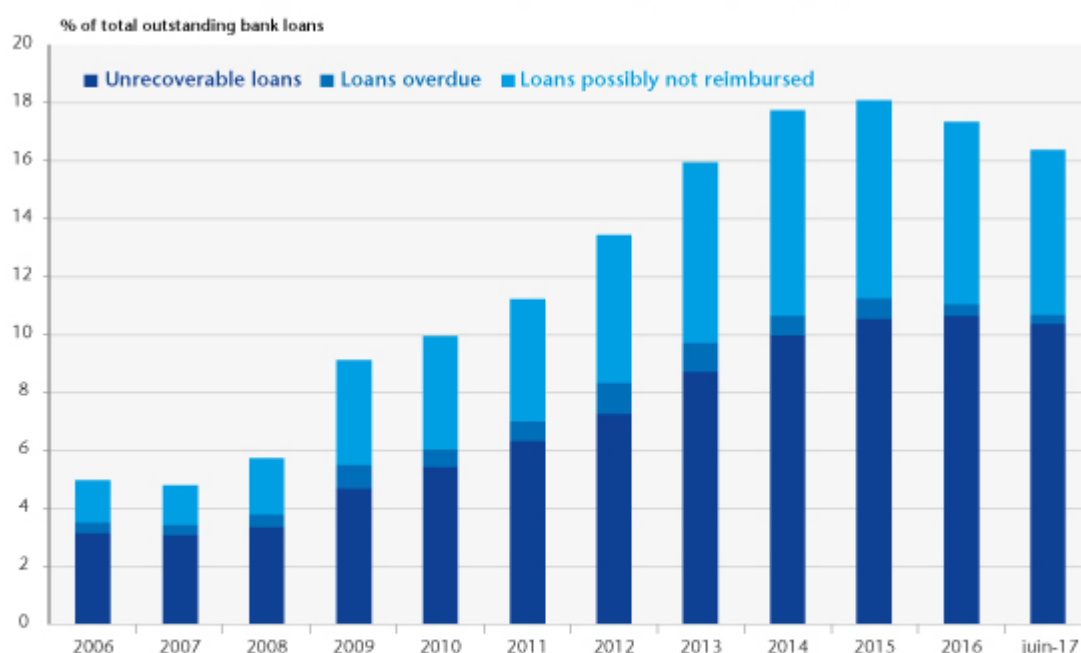
revenue, the government is counting on the fight against tax evasion (repatriation, recovery of VAT with electronic invoicing), and the establishment of a web tax on large companies on the Net.

### **A banking sector in full convalescence**

The deterioration in the situation of Italy's businesses, in particular small and medium-sized enterprises, has led since 2009 to a sharp increase in non-performing loans. Since 2016, the situation of the Italian banking sector has improved somewhat, with a return on equity of 9.3% in June 2017 against 1.5% in September 2016. The ROE is higher than the European average (7% in June 2017) and puts the country ahead of Germany (3.0%) and France (7.2%). In addition, at the end of June 2017, the ratio of bad debt to total loans came to 16.4% (8.4% net of provisions), of which 10.4% was for unrecoverable loans (**Figure 3**). Banks are shedding these loans at an increasing pace with various partners (Anglo-American hedge funds, doBank, Atlante and Atlante 2 funds, etc.). Hence, between 2013 and 2016, the share of bad loans that were repaid in the year rose from 6 to 9%. Overall, the amount of bad loans was cut by 25 billion euros between 2016 and June 2017, down to 324 billion euros, of which 9 billion euros came from the liquidation of the Venetian banks (Banca Popolare di Vicenza and Veneto banca). This improvement reflects the fact that the banks are increasingly adopting active management policies for bad debts. In addition, the 2015 Asset Seizure Reform reduced the length of property seizure proceedings.



Figure 3. Share of non-performing debt by category



Note: Non-performing loans can be broken down into three mutually exclusive categories:

- Unrecoverable loans, which designates exposure to a debtor who's insolvent;
- Loans possibly not reimbursed, which designates exposure to a debtor who has little chance of reimbursing in full without some action such as the invoking of guarantees;
- Loans with overdue repayments, which designates any exposure where the delay in reimbursement exceeds 90 days.

Sources: Bank of Italy, Financial stability reports.

The Italian government has implemented various reforms to cope with the difficulties facing the country's banking sector. First, it has been working to accelerate the clearance of bad debts and to reform the law on bankruptcy. Legislative Decree 119/2016 introduced the "martial pact" (*patto marciano*), which makes it possible to transfer real estate used as collateral to creditors (other than the debtor's principal residence); the real estate can then be sold by the creditor if the default lasts more than 6 months. Other rules aim at speeding up procedures: the use of digital technologies for hearings of the parties, the establishment of a digital register of ongoing bankruptcy proceedings, the reduction of opposition periods during procedures, an obligation for judges to order provisional payments for amounts not in dispute, the simplification of the transfer of ownership, etc.

In April 2016, the government introduced a public guarantee system (*Garanzia Cartolarizzazione Sofferenze, GCS*) covering bad debts, for a period of 18 months (extendable for another 18 months). To benefit from this guarantee, the bad debt must

be securitized and repurchased by a securitization vehicle; the latter then issues an asset-backed security, the senior tranche of which is guaranteed by the Italian Treasury.

The Atlante investment fund was also set up in April 2016, based on public and private capital, in order to recapitalize troubled Italian banks and redeem bad debt.

There are many lessons to be drawn from the case of the Monte dei Paschi di Siena bank (MPS, the country's fifth-largest bank), which has been a cause of major concern. The Italian State, working in coordination with the European Commission and the ECB, had to intervene as a matter of urgency, following the failure of the private recapitalization plan at the end of 2016. A system of public financial support for banks in difficulty was introduced after a government proposal – *"Salva Risparmio"* [\[4\]](#) of 23 December 2016 – was enacted on 16 February 2017. The precautionary recapitalization of MPS was approved by the Commission on 4 July 2017 [\[5\]](#), in the amount of 8.1 billion euros. The Italian State increased its stake in the bank's capital by 3.9 billion euros on the one hand, and on the other 4.5 billion euros of the bank's subordinated bonds were converted into shares. The State is also to buy 1.5 billion euros of shares resulting from the forced conversion of bonds held by individuals (i.e. a total of 5.4 billion euros injected by the State, giving it a 70% holding in the capital of MPS). MPS will also sell 26.1 billion euros of bad debt to a special securitization vehicle, and the bank will be restructured.

Two other banks, the Venetian banks Banca Popolare di Vicenza and Veneto banca (the 15th and 16th largest banks in the country in terms of capital), were put into liquidation on 25 June 2017, in accordance with a "national" insolvency procedure, which lies outside the framework set by the European BRRD Directive [\[6\]](#). The Intesa Sanpaolo bank was selected to take over, for one symbolic euro, the assets and liabilities of the two banks, with the exception of their bad

debts and their subordinated liabilities. The Italian State will invest 4.8 billion euros in the capital of Intesa Sanpaolo in order to keep its prudential ratios unchanged, and it can grant up to 12 billion euros of public guarantees.

The Italian banking sector is thus in the midst of restructuring, and the process of clearing up bad debt is underway. However, this process will take time; the ECB nevertheless seems to want to tighten the rules. In early October 2017, the ECB unveiled proposals demanding that the banks fully cover the unsecured portion of their bad debt within two years at the latest, with the secured portion of the debt to be covered within at most seven years. These proposals will apply only to new bad debt. The Italian parliament and the Italian government reacted to these announcements by warning of the risk of a credit crisis. Even though these are only proposals, for now, this indicates that it is a priority to clear Italy's bad debt rapidly, and that the government must stay the course.

Table. Italy: Summary of forecasts

Change from the preceding period (%)

	2017				2018				2016	2017	2018	2019
	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4				
GDP	0.5	0.3	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.3	1.1	1.5	1.2	0.9
GDP per capita	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	1.0	1.2	0.9	0.7
Household consumption	0.7	0.2	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	0.3	1.5	1.5	1.2	1.0
Public consumption	0.4	0.2	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.5	0.8	0.1	-0.2
Total GFCF, of which:	-2.2	1.1	3.0	0.5	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.4	3.0	3.2	3.0	1.3
Productive	-7.2	3.6	8.2	0.6	0.5	0.4	0.4	0.3	7.1	6.6	6.4	1.3
Housing	0.7	-0.3	0.4	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2	2.8	1.8	0.7	0.6
Exports of goods and services	1.8	0.1	1.6	0.6	0.7	0.7	0.7	0.7	2.6	5.1	2.9	2.3
Imports of goods and services	0.7	1.6	1.2	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	0.6	3.3	5.4	2.8	2.0
<b>Contributions:</b>												
Domestic demand excl. stock	0.1	0.4	0.7	0.3	0.3	0.2	0.2	0.2	1.5	1.6	1.3	0.8
Change in stock	0.1	0.4	-0.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	-0.3	-0.1	-0.2	0.0
Foreign trade	0.3	-0.4	0.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	-0.2	0.0	0.1	0.1
Consumer prices (HICP) <sup>1</sup>	1.4	1.6	1.2	1.2	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.9	-0.1	1.0	0.5	1.0
Unemployment rate	11.6	11.2	11.2	11.1	11.0	10.9	10.9	10.8	11.7	11.3	10.9	10.8
Current balance as % of GDP									2.7	2.6	2.6	2.5
Current deficit as % of GDP									-2.5	-2.0	-1.5	-1.2
Public debt as % of GDP									132.8	132.3	131.1	129.9
Fiscal impulse in GDP points									0.3	0.3	0.1	0.1
GDP – euro zone	0.6	0.7	0.6	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4	1.8	2.4	1.9	1.6

1. For the quarters, year-on-year. For the years, annual average.

Sources: ISTAT, Author's calculations, OFCE October 2017 forecast.

[1] Estimated according to a model using trend breaks, we estimate the productivity trend at -1.0% for the period 2015-2019, due to growth that is more job-rich.

[2] This increase in the labour force is due to a higher participation rate among older workers (aged 55-64), which is linked to the lowering of the minimum retirement age. It is also due to women's increased participation in the labour market, as a result of the Jobs Act (extension of maternity leave, telecommuting, financial measures to reconcile work and family life, a budget of 100 million euros for the creation of childcare services, etc.).

[3] The increase in productivity per capita in market waged employment rose from -0.7 % in 2017 to 0.3 % in 2018 and 0.6 % in 2019.

[4] The Salva Risparmio Decree Law provides for the creation of a fund with 20 billion euros to support the banking sector. This allows the State to carry out precautionary recapitalizations of banks; it provides guarantees on new issues of bank debt; and it provides liquidity from the central bank under Emergency Liquidity Assistance (ELA). It also protects savers by providing the possibility of the State buying back subordinated bonds converted into shares prior to the public intervention.

[5] European Parliament, [The precautionary precaution of Monte dei Paschi di Siena](#)

[6] For greater detail, see the note [in French] by Thomas Humblot, [Italie : liquidation de Veneto Banca et de Banca Popolare di Vicenza](#), July 2017.

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# Austerity and purchasing power in France

By [Mathieu Plane](#)

Is France implementing an austerity policy? How can it be measured? Although this question is a subject of ongoing public debate, it hasn't really been settled. For many observers, the relative resilience of wage dynamics indicates that France has not carried out an austerity policy, unlike [certain neighbours in southern Europe, in particular Spain and Greece, where nominal labour costs have fallen](#). Others conclude that France cannot have practiced austerity since government spending has continued to rise since the onset of the crisis[1]. The 50 billion euros in savings over the period 2015-17 announced by the Government would therefore only be

the beginning of the turn to austerity.

Furthermore, if we adhere to the rules of the Stability and Growth Pact, the degree of restriction or expansion of a fiscal policy can be measured by the change in the primary structural balance, which is also called the fiscal impulse. This includes on one side the efforts made on primary public spending (*i.e.* excluding interest) relative to the change in potential GDP, and on the other side the change in the tax burden in GDP points. Thus, over the period 2011-13, France's primary structural balance improved by 2.5 percentage points of GDP according to the OECD, by 2.7 points according to the European Commission, and by 3.5 points according to the OFCE. While there are significant differences in the measurement of fiscal austerity during this period, the fact remains that, depending on the method of calculation, it amounted to between 55 and 75 billion euros over three years[\[2\]](#).

A different way of measuring the extent of fiscal austerity involves looking at the change in the components of household purchasing power. Purchasing power can in fact be used to identify the channels for transmitting austerity, whether this is through labour income or capital, benefits or the tax burden on households[\[3\]](#). Changes in the components of income clearly show that there was a pre-crisis and a post-crisis in terms of the dynamics of purchasing power per household.

**Over the period 2000-2007, purchasing power grew by more than 4000 euros per household ...**

This corresponds to an average increase of about 500 euros per year per household [\[4\]](#) (Table) over the eight years preceding the subprime crisis, a growth rate of 1.1% per year. On the resource side, real labour income per household (which includes the EBITDA of the self-employed), supported by the creation of more than 2 million full-time equivalent jobs over the period 2000 to 2007, increased on average by 0.9% per year. But it is above all real capital income per household

(which includes the imputed rents of households occupying the accommodation that they own) that increased dramatically over this period, rising twice as fast (1.7% on average per year) as real labour income. As for social benefits in cash, these increased by 1% on average in real terms in this period, *i.e.* a rate equivalent to the rate for total resources. As for levies, tax and social contributions from 2000 to 2007 have helped to reduce purchasing power per household by 0.9 points per year, which corresponds to about 100 euros per year on average. Breaking down the increase in levies, 85% came from social contributions (employees and self-employed), mainly due to hikes in premiums related to pension reform. Taxes on income and wealth contributed to cutting purchasing power per household by only 14 euros per year, despite a sharp increase in capital income and property prices over the period 2000-2007. During this period, taxes on households deflated by consumer prices increased by less than 2%, whereas real household resources grew by almost 9% and real capital income by 14%. The reduction in income tax, which began under the Jospin government, and was continued by Jacques Chirac during his second term, explains in large part why taxes have had so little negative impact on purchasing power during this period.

Changes in the components of purchasing power per household (in 2013 euros)

		Labour income (incl. EBITDA of IU)*	Capital income (incl. imputed rent**)	Social benefits in cash	Other resources	Total resources	Tax on income and wealth	Social contributions (salaried and non-salaried)	Total contributions	Purchasing power per household
Cumulative change	2000-2007	2283	1376	1120	34	4814	-110	-668	-778	4036
	2008-2015 o/w:	-1059	-911	1502	-61	-529	-785	-318	-1102	-1631
	2008-10	-293	-613	1021	-1	114	36	-36	0	114
	2011-13	-680	-314	355	-60	-699	-789	-143	-932	-1631
	2014-15	-85	16	125	0	56	-31	-139	-170	-114
Average annual change	2000-2007	285	172	140	4	602	-14	-83	-97	504
	2008-2015 o/w:	-151	-130	215	-9	-76	-112	-45	-157	-233
	2008-10	-98	-204	340	0	38	12	-12	0	38
	2011-13	-227	-105	118	-20	-233	-263	-48	-311	-544
	2014-15	-43	8	63	0	28	-16	-69	-85	-57

\* IU = Individual undertakings.

\*\* The notion of an imputed or fictive rent covers the service that is rendered to the owner of an accommodation by that accommodation, that is, the rent that owners would have to pay if they were tenants.

Sources: Insee national accounts, author's calculations, France's 2015 Budget Act.

...but over the period 2008-2015, purchasing power per household



## **fell by more than 1600 euros**

The crisis marks a sharp turn with respect to past trends. Indeed, over the period 2008-2015, purchasing power per household fell, on average, by almost 1630 euros, or 230 euros per year.

Over the eight years since the start of the crisis, we can distinguish three sub-periods:

– The first, from 2008 to 2010, following the subprime crisis and the collapse of Lehman Brothers, is characterized by the relatively high resistance of purchasing power per household, which increased by nearly 40 euros per year on average, despite the loss of 250,000 jobs over this period and the sharp decline in capital income (200 euros on average per year per household). On the one hand, the sharp drop in oil prices from mid-2008 had the effect of supporting real income, including real wages, which increased 0.9% annually. On the other hand, the stimulus package and the shock absorbers of France's social security system played their countercyclical role by propping up average purchasing power through a sharp rise in social benefits in kind (340 euros on average per year household) and a slightly positive contribution by taxes to purchasing power.

– The second period, from 2011 to 2013, is marked by intense fiscal consolidation; this is a period in which [the tax burden increased by about 70 billion euros in three years,](#) with a massive impact on purchasing power. Higher tax and social security charges wound up eroding purchasing power by 930 euros per household, more than 300 euros on average per year. Moreover, the very small increase in employment (+32,000) and stagnating real wages, combined with the impact of an increase in the number of households (0.9% annually), led to a reduction in real labour income per household of almost 230 euros per year. In addition, real capital income per household continued to make a negative contribution to



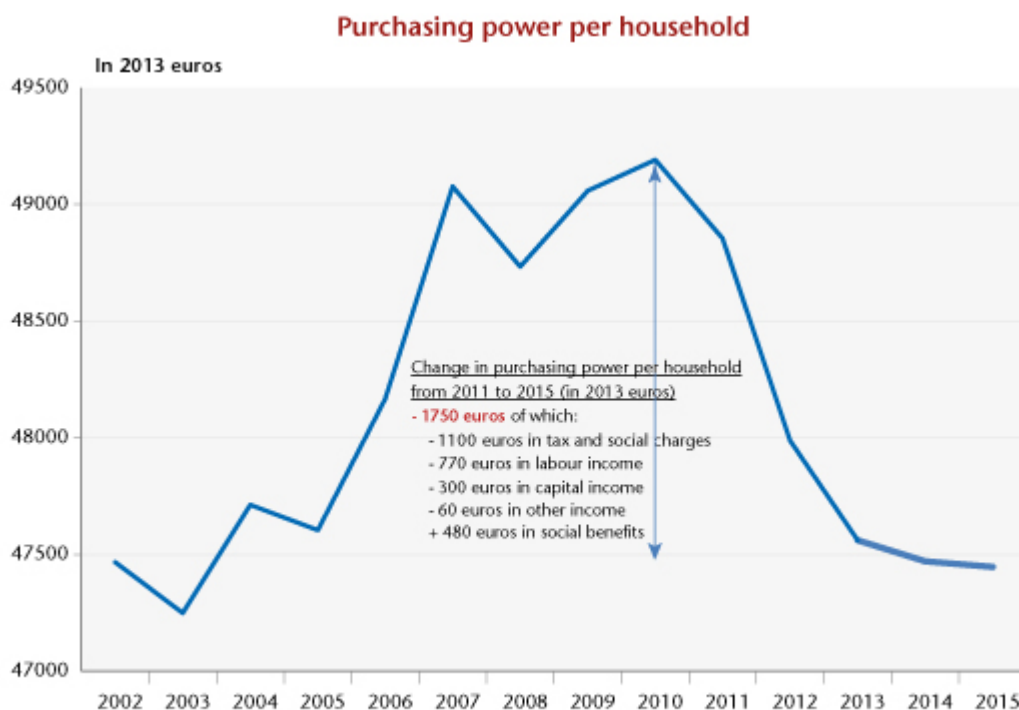
purchasing power from 2011 to 2013 (-105 euros on average per year per household). Finally, although social benefits were slowing compared to the previous period, they were the only factor making a positive contribution to purchasing power (about 120 euros per year per household). In the end, purchasing power per household fell by 1,630 euros in three years.

– The third period, 2014 and 2015, will see yet another slight reduction in household purchasing power, amounting to about 110 euros in two years. The weak situation of employment and real wages will not offset the increase in the number of households. Thus, real labour income per household will decline slightly over the two years (-43 euros per year on average). Real capital income will, in turn, be roughly neutral in terms of its effect on purchasing power per household. Although they are not rising as much, tax and social contributions will continue to weigh on purchasing power due to the ramp-up of certain tax measures approved in the past (environmental taxes, higher pension contributions, local taxes, etc.). In total, the increase in the rate of levies on households in 2014-15 will reduce purchasing power per household by 170 euros. In addition, the expected savings on public spending will hold back growth in social benefits per household, which will rise by only about 60 euros per year on average, a rate that is half as high as the pre-crisis period despite the worsening social situation.

While this analysis does not tell us about the distribution per quantile of the change in purchasing power per household, it nevertheless provides a macro view of the impact of austerity on purchasing power since 2011. Out of the 1750 euros per household lost in purchasing power from 2011 to 2015 (see Figure), 1100 euros is directly related to higher taxes and social contributions. In addition to the direct impact of austerity, there is the more indirect impact on the other components of purchasing power. In fact, by cutting activity

through the mechanism of the fiscal multiplier, France's austerity policy has had a massive impact on the labour market, by either reducing employment or holding down real wages. While the magnitude is difficult to assess, the fact remains that real labour income per household fell by 770 euros in five years. Finally, while since the onset of the crisis social benefits have up to now acted as a major shock absorber for purchasing power, the extent of savings in public spending planned from 2015 (out of the 21 billion euros in savings in 2015, 9.6 billion will come from social security and 2.4 billion from spending on state interventions) will have a mechanical impact on the dynamics of purchasing power.

Thus, with purchasing power per household falling in 2015 to its level of thirteen years ago and having suffered a historic decline in 2011-13 in a period of unprecedented fiscal consolidation, it seems difficult to argue on the one hand that France has not practiced austerity so far and on the other hand that it is not facing any problem with short-term demand.



Sources: Insee national accounts, author's calculations, France's 2015 Budget Act.

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[1] Since 2011, the rate of growth of public spending in volume has been positive, but has halved compared to the decade 2000-10 (1.1% in volume over the period 2011-14, against 2.2% over the period 2000-10). Moreover, in the last four years, it has increased at a rate slightly below the rate of potential GDP (1.4%). From an economic point of view, this corresponds to an improvement in the structural balance due to an adjustment in public spending of 0.5 percentage point of GDP over the period 2011-14.

[2] These differences in the measurement of austerity come from differences in a number of evaluation factors, such as the level of potential GDP and its growth rate, which serve as the benchmark for calculating the structural fiscal adjustment.

[3] It is important to note that gross disposable income includes only income related to cash benefits (pensions, unemployment benefits, family allowances, etc.) but not social transfers in kind (health care, education, etc.) or public collective expenditures that benefit households (police, justice, defence, etc.).

[4] Here we use the concept of average purchasing power per household and not purchasing power per consumption unit.

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# **Fiscal policy and macroeconomic stability in an**

# **economic and monetary union: the case of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU)**

By Mamadou DIOP and Adama DIAW

The idea that fiscal policy is an effective tool of economic policy for stimulating the real economy has neither empirical backing nor unanimous support among economists. [An article published in the \*Revue de l'OFCE\* \(no. 137, 2014\)](#) deals with two major shortcomings in government policy in the WAEMU: delays in implementing fiscal measures and the irreversibility of certain public spending measures. The problem centers on the capacity to cancel certain expenditures when they are no longer needed to stabilize the economy. Having a reversible fiscal policy is essential these days to ensure that the public purse is sustainable over the medium term. To stabilize a country's economy using fiscal policy, it is important to be able to identify which public spending measures significantly affect economic activity, while taking into account their response time. Such is the purpose of this article: to evaluate the impact of fiscal shocks on the economic activity of WAEMU countries so as to reveal the channels through which fiscal policy is transmitted.

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## **Towards a better governance**

# in the EU?

By [Catherine Mathieu](#) and [Henri Sterdyniak](#)

The 10th EUROFRAME Conference on economic policy issues in the European Union was held on 24 May 2013 in Warsaw on the topic, “Towards a better governance in the EU?” Revised versions of twelve of the papers presented at the Conference are included in issue 132 of the “Debates and Policies” collection of the *Revue de l’OFCE* entitled “[Towards a better governance in the EU?](#)”. The papers are organized around four themes: fiscal governance, analysis of fiscal policy, bank governance, and macroeconomic issues.

The global financial crisis of 2007 and the sovereign debt crisis in the euro area that began in 2009 have highlighted shortcomings in EU governance. The intense debate that has been going on among economists over how to analyze these shortcomings and proposals for improved governance also marked the EUROFRAME Conference.

How can the Economic and Monetary Union be strengthened between countries that are still fundamentally different? How can we get out of the financial and economic crisis, the sovereign debt crisis, fiscal austerity and depression? Is it possible to develop a governance of the euro area that ensures the strength of the single currency, that avoids widening the disparities between Member States, and that gives the Members the flexibility needed, while forbidding non-cooperative policies, whether that means the excessive pursuit of competitiveness and trade surpluses or the irresponsible swelling of their public or foreign debt?

The articles in this issue provide readers with various viewpoints on possible pathways that Europe could take:

– Some authors think that we should stick to the original Treaty, abolish solidarity mechanisms, prohibit the

Central Bank from buying the debt of member countries, and make it compulsory for them to find financing on the financial markets, which, stung by the Greek experience, will now be more vigilant and impose risk premiums on countries they consider lax. But is this compatible with the single currency? Are the markets really competent in macroeconomic matters? And will the euro zone members accept being reduced to the rank of countries without monetary sovereignty, whose public debt is considered risky and who do not control their interest rates?

– Other authors believe that we should gradually move towards a federal Europe, where the European authorities would be responsible for the fiscal policy of each MemberState; this would need to be accompanied by a democratization of EU institutions, perhaps including even some form of political union. But can there be centralized management of countries in different economic circumstances with different economic and social structures, and which thus need differentiated strategies? Isn't the euro zone just too heterogeneous for this? Would every country agree to submit its social and economic choices to European trade-offs?

– Other authors believe that such heterogeneous countries cannot share a single currency; that the Northern countries will refuse to give an unconditional guarantee of public debt, even though this is a prerequisite for maintaining the euro zone's unity; that Europe is incapable of organizing a common but differentiated strategy; and that the differentials accumulated in terms of competitiveness require large exchange rate adjustments in Europe. Exchange rates need to be allowed to reflect the Members' different situations, *i.e.* sharp exchange rate falls in the Southern countries, and sharp rises in the Northern countries, by returning to the European Monetary System, or even to flexible exchange rates. Each country would then have to face up to its responsibilities: the Northern countries will have to boost domestic demand, while the Southern ones will have to use

their gains in competitiveness to rebuild their export sectors. But no country is demanding this leap into the unknown – the financial consequences could be terrible.

– Finally, some authors, including ourselves, believe that public debts should once again be risk-free assets, guaranteed by the ECB, as part of a process of genuine coordination of economic policy by the Member States, while explicitly targeting full employment and the coordinated reduction of imbalances in the zone. But isn't such coordination a myth? Is a country going to agree to change its economic policy objectives to help the situation of its partners? Don't the European countries today mistrust each other too much to agree to guarantee the public debt of their partners?

These are the questions addressed in this issue, which, as the European elections draw near, we hope will make a useful contribution to the debate on EU governance.

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[\[1\] EUROFRAME](#) is a network of European economic institutes, which includes: the DIW and IFW (Germany), WIFO (Austria), ETLA (Finland), OFCE (France), ESRI (Ireland), PROMETEIA (Italy), CPB (Netherlands), CASE (Poland) and NIESR (United Kingdom).

[\[2\]](#) This issue is published in English.

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# The myth of fiscal reform

By [Henri Sterdyniak](#)

On 19 November, the French Prime Minister announced that he was suspending the implementation of the “ecotax” and working on a major tax reform. This has been raised frequently in public debate, without the reform’s content and objectives being spelled out. Conflicting proposals are in fact being presented.

Some advocate a sharp reduction in taxes, which could boost the French economy by encouraging employees to work harder, households to save more, and businesses to invest and hire, which would make France more competitive. But public spending would have to be reduced further, even though the government has already committed to a 70 billion reduction by 2017. What spending should be cut in particular? Social benefits would have to be drastically reduced, which is not compatible with the maintenance of the French social model. Some want to shift the burden of social protection from businesses to households. The MEDEF for instance is calling for reducing taxes on business by 100 billion. This would require another sharp hike in taxes on households, leading to a collapse in consumption. Should France move in that direction, should it renew tax competition in Europe by lowering household income?

Others are proposing distributing the tax burden more equitably between income from labour and income from capital and strengthening the redistributive character of taxation. But France is already one of the world’s most redistributive countries, with high taxes on big earners, large estates and capital income. All these are already heavily taxed, following increases made by the Fillon and then Ayrault governments.

Some propose chasing down tax and social niches, expanding the tax brackets and reducing rates. But doesn’t this forget the



incentive role of taxation? Many programmes, even complex ones, are legitimate for reasons of equity (such as the family quotient) or as employment incentives (such as exemption from social charges on low wages or for child care) or assistance to the working poor (e.g. the PPE in-work tax allowance) or as other incentives (such as the exemption of charitable donations or union dues). Some income is of course not taxed, such as certain capital income (life insurance or PEA plans) or unrealized capital gains (but it is difficult to tax gains that are merely potential) or implicit rents (such as enjoyed by those in owner-occupied apartments), but who would dare to touch these? The point is more a patient dismantling of niches, which has been underway for several years, rather than a major reform.

Making our taxation more ecological is certainly a pressing obligation. But is there really a double dividend in jobs and in ecology? Doesn't the environmental gain have a cost in jobs, purchasing power and competitiveness? Can we increase environmental taxation in France without a worldwide agreement, which looks unlikely today? Environmental taxation is necessarily complicated if we want to avoid hitting (too hard) farmers, industry, poor people, marginal regions, disadvantaged suburbs, etc. This is the lesson of the failure of the carbon tax (in 2009) and France's ecotax (in 2013).

We must of course fight against tax evasion by the wealthy and by large corporations, but this mainly involves tax harmonization at the European level, which is not without risk if it means that France must align with the lowest bidder on taxing wealth (ISF), the corporations (IS) or income (IR).

A large-scale tax reform, one that does not alter the tax burden, inevitably means winners and losers. Who the losers will be should be made clear: retirees, homeowners, savers?

A miracle project has shot to the surface: the merger of income tax and the CSG wealth tax. But neither the terms nor

the objectives of this merger have been specified. It is running first of all into opposition on principle from the trade unions, who take a dim view of any merger of a State tax with the CSG tax, whose proceeds are allocated directly to social protection. A reform would lead towards putting the State in charge of sickness and family benefits (especially if at the same time a portion of employer contributions were taxed), with the risk that social benefits become adjustment variables with respect to the public finances.

The CSG tax currently hits employees harder than those on replacement income. A merger of CSG and income tax without specific compensation could thus be very costly for pensioners and the unemployed, and in particular for poor people who currently pay neither the CSG tax nor income tax. Conversely, capital income currently incurs a total taxation – the CSG, the Contribution to the Reimbursement of the Social Debt (CRDS) and the main social charges – of 15.5%, which is significantly higher than the 8% paid by employees. This can of course be considered as offsetting the fact that, by definition, they are not hit by employer contributions. But, as we shall see, comparing levies on different forms of income is not so easy.

A merger like this could provide an opportunity for a complete re-think of the various programmes that have gradually led to narrowing the income tax base, and in particular certain tax loopholes. But some of these tax expenditures are essential, so it would be necessary to replace them with explicit subsidies or keep them in the merged tax. The merger would not in itself solve the problem of income that is currently exempt, whether this is implicit rent or certain capital gains.

Some want to merge all the programmes helping poor people (RSA income supplement, PPE tax benefit, housing allowance) through a negative tax administered by the tax authorities, thereby ignoring the need for the kind of detailed, personalized,

real-time follow-up that France's Family Allowance Fund (CAF) is able to provide.

The lawmakers will have to decide the question of whether the merged tax should be calculated individually or jointly per family. This is an important issue: should the State recognize the right of individuals to pool their incomes and share this with their children? But should we really be launching this debate today? Is calling into question the family nature of our tax system all that urgent right now? Individual treatment would mean transferring the most significant charges, in particular at the expense of single-earner families or middle-class families. With an unchanged burden, this would imply a sharp rise in the tax burden on households. A uniform reduction in rates would be highly anti-redistributive, to the detriment of families in particular and in favour of single people without children. Individualization should necessarily be accompanied by a strong increase in benefits for children (especially large families). This would lead to a more redistributive system in favour of poor families, but better-off families would lose out, which raises difficult questions about horizontal equity.

There is also the question of what kind of levy is used. We cannot move to a simple system of withholding at source without greatly reducing the progressive, family character of the French system. A company does not need to know the income of their employee's spouse or their other income. A reform would make it possible to withhold a first tranche of income tax (of 20% of income for example), while factoring in allowances (an individual deduction, possibly a deduction for a spouse with no income, a deduction for children). The balance would then be collected (or refunded) the following year according to the tax roll. The system would hardly be simplified. Contrary to what we are told by Thomas Piketty, a CSG-income tax merger is not the touchstone of tax reform.

Should we be concerned that the evocation of a tax reform is

simply a sham, masking a refusal to address the real problems of the French economy: the difficulty of fitting into the new international division of labour; the growth of inequality in primary income due to globalization and the financialization of the economy; and the failure of the developed countries, especially the euro zone, to find new sources of growth after the financial crisis?

The problem is probably not so much the structure of taxation as it is the error in economic policy made — at the level of the euro zone of adding fiscal austerity to the depressive shock caused by the financial crisis and, at the level of France, of raising taxes by 3 GDP points since 2010 (60 billion euros) to fill a public deficit attributable solely to the recession.

The French tax system takes in 46% of GDP; primary public expenditure represents 50%. At the same time, France is one of the few developed countries where income inequalities have not increased greatly in recent years. Our high level of public and social spending is a societal choice that must be maintained; the French tax system is already highly redistributive. Some reforms are of course necessary to further improve its redistributive character, to make it more transparent and socially acceptable. Nevertheless, what matters most is precisely the level of the formation of primary income. There is no miracle reform: the current system, the product of a long process of economic and social compromise, is difficult to improve.

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# Austerity in Europe: a change of course?

By Marion Cochard and Danielle Schweisguth

On 29 May, the European Commission sent the members of the European Union its new economic policy recommendations. In these recommendations, the Commission calls for postponing the date for achieving the public deficit goals of four euro zone countries (Spain, France, Netherlands and Portugal), leaving them more time to hit the 3% target. Italy is no longer in the excessive deficit procedure. Only Belgium is called on to intensify its efforts. Should this new roadmap be interpreted as a shift towards an easing of austerity policy in Europe? Can we expect a return to growth in the Old Continent?

These are not trivial matters. [An OFCE Note \(no. 29, 18 July 2013\)](#) attempts to answer this by simulating three scenarios for fiscal policy using the [iAGS model](#). It appears from this study that postponing the public deficit targets in the four euro zone countries does not reflect a real change of course for Europe's fiscal policy. The worst-case scenario, in which Spain and Portugal would have been subject to the same recipes as Greece, was, it is true, avoided. The Commission is implicitly agreeing to allow the automatic stabilizers to work when conditions deteriorate. However, for many countries, the recommendations with respect to budgetary efforts still go beyond what is required by the Treaties (an annual reduction in the structural deficit of 0.5 percent of GDP), with as a consequence an increase of 0.3 point in the unemployment rate in the euro zone between 2012 and 2017.

We believe, however, that a third way is possible. This would involve adopting a "fiscally serious" position in 2014 that does not call into question the sustainability of the public debt. The strategy would be to maintain a constant tax burden

and to allow public spending to keep pace with potential growth. This amounts to maintaining a neutral fiscal stimulus between 2014 and 2017. In this scenario, the public deficit of the euro zone would improve by 2.4 GDP points between 2012 and 2017 and the trajectory in the public debt would be reversed starting in 2014. By 2030, the public deficit would be in surplus (0.7%) and debt would be close to 60% of GDP. Above all, this scenario would lower the unemployment rate significantly by 2017. The European countries could perhaps learn from the wisdom of Jean de La Fontaine's fable of the tortoise and the hare: *"Rien ne sert de courir, il faut partir à point"*, i.e. Slow and steady wins the race.

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## France: why such zeal?

By Marion Cochard and Danielle Schweisguth

On 29 May, the European Commission sent the members of the European Union its new economic policy recommendations. As part of this, the Commission granted France an additional two years to reach the deficit reduction target of 3%. This target is now set for 2015, and to achieve this the European Commission is calling for fiscal impulses of -1.3 GDP points in 2013 and -0.8 point in 2014 (see ["Austerity in Europe: a change of course?"](#)). This would ease the structural effort needed, since the implementation of the previous commitments would have required impulses of -2.1 and -1.3 GDP points for 2013 and 2014, respectively.

Despite this, the French government has chosen not to relax its austerity policy and is keeping in place all the measures announced in the draft Finance Act (PLF) of autumn 2012. The continuing austerity measures go well beyond the Commission's

recommendations: a negative fiscal impulse of -1.8 GDP point, including a 1.4 percentage point increase in the tax burden for the year 2013 alone. Worse, the broad guidelines for the 2014 budget presented by the government to Parliament on 2 July 2013 point to a structural effort of 20 billion euros for 2014, *i.e.* one percentage point of GDP, whereas the Commission required only 0.8 point. The government is thus demanding an additional 0.6 GDP point fiscal cut, which it had already set out in the multi-year spending program in the 2013 Finance Act.

The table below helps to provide an overview of the effort and of its impact on the French economy. It shows the trends in growth, in unemployment and in the government deficit in 2013 and 2014, according to three budget strategies:

1. One using the relaxation recommended by the Commission in May 2013;
2. One based on the budget approved by the government for 2013 and, *a priori*, for 2014;
3. One based on an alternative scenario that takes into account the negative 1.8 GDP point fiscal impulse for 2013 and calculates a fiscal impulse for 2014 that would be sufficient to meet the European Commission's public deficit target of -3.6%.

**The different scenarios for deficit reduction in France**

In %

	Relaxation (1)		Approved budget (2)		Alternative scenario (3)	
	2013	2014	2013	2014	2013	2014
Fiscal impulse	-1.3	-0.8	-1.8	-1.0	-1.8	-0.2
Unemployment rate	10.5	10.6	10.7	11.1	10.7	10.5
Growth	0.2	1.3	-0.2	1.0	-0.2	1.7
Public deficit	-4.3	-3.6	-3.9	-3.1	-3.9	-3.6

Source : Authors' calculations based on the iAGS model.

According to our estimates using the iAGS model [\[1\]](#), the public deficit would be cut to 3.1% of GDP in 2014 in scenario (2), whereas the Commission requires only 3.6%. As a

consequence of this excess of zeal, the cumulative growth for 2013 and 2014 if the approved budget is applied would be 0.7 percentage point lower than growth in the other two scenarios (0.8 point against 1.5 points). The corollary is an increase in unemployment in 2013 and 2014: the unemployment rate, around 9.9% in 2012, would thus rise to 11.1% in 2014, an increase of more than 350,000 unemployed for the period. In contrast, the more relaxed scenario from the European Commission would see a quasi-stabilization of unemployment in 2013, while the alternative scenario would make it possible to reverse the trend in unemployment in 2014.

While the failure of austerity policy in recent years seems to be gradually impinging on the position of the European Commission, the French government is persisting along its same old path. In the face of the social emergency that the country is facing and the paradigm shift that seems to be taking hold in most international institutions, the French government is choosing to stick to its 3% fetish.

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[\[1\]](#) iAGS stands for the Independent Annual Growth Survey. This is a simplified model of the eleven main economies in the euro zone (Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal and Spain). For more detail, see the working document [Model for euro area medium term projections](#).

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# **A recession is not inevitable**

By Marion Cochard, Bruno Ducoudré and Danielle Schweisguth

The cold blast from the autumn forecasts continues with the



publication of the European Central Bank's latest forecasts. Revising its growth outlook for the euro zone downwards (to -0.3% for 2013, against the forecast of 0.9% in September), the ECB in turn is now pointing to the reinforced austerity measures and the growing impact of uncertainty in the financial markets. It is clear that the intensity of the fiscal consolidation is paralyzing growth in the euro zone through the interplay of the fiscal multipliers, while not managing to restore confidence. In this note we show that the recessionary spiral that the euro zone is getting sucked into is not an inevitability.

In the first edition of the [2013 iAGS report](#), which was produced in partnership with the German IMK institute and the Danish ECLM institute, the OFCE offers an alternative strategy to the current fiscal consolidation policy. This alternative would make it possible to restore growth in the medium term while still meeting the European budget commitments. As Jérôme Creel showed in his latest post, ["Could France have a different fiscal policy?"](#), there is room for budgetary manoeuvring in a way that is consistent with the current treaty framework.

Under the aegis of the European Commission, the European countries have pledged to continue their austerity programmes from 2013 to 2015 on a relatively large scale, especially if we take into account the efforts already made. Apart from Germany, where the cumulative fiscal impulse will be virtually nil, most European countries are planning to reduce their primary structural deficit by more than 2 GDP points between 2012 and 2015 (from -1.4 points for Finland to -7.5 points for Greece, cf. the table).

**Table. Cumulative fiscal impulses in the euro zone**

In GDP points

	Germany	France	Italy	Spain	Netherlands	Belgium	Greece	Portugal	Ireland	Austria	Finland
2010-2012	0,1	-4,1	-4,7	-7,0	-2,3	-1,5	-18,3	-9,1	-8,3	-1,1	-3,3
2013-2015	-0,3	-2,9	-2,1	-4,2	-2,9	-2,2	-7,5	-2,6	-5,7	-1,8	-1,4

Source : Eurostat data, iAGS simulations.

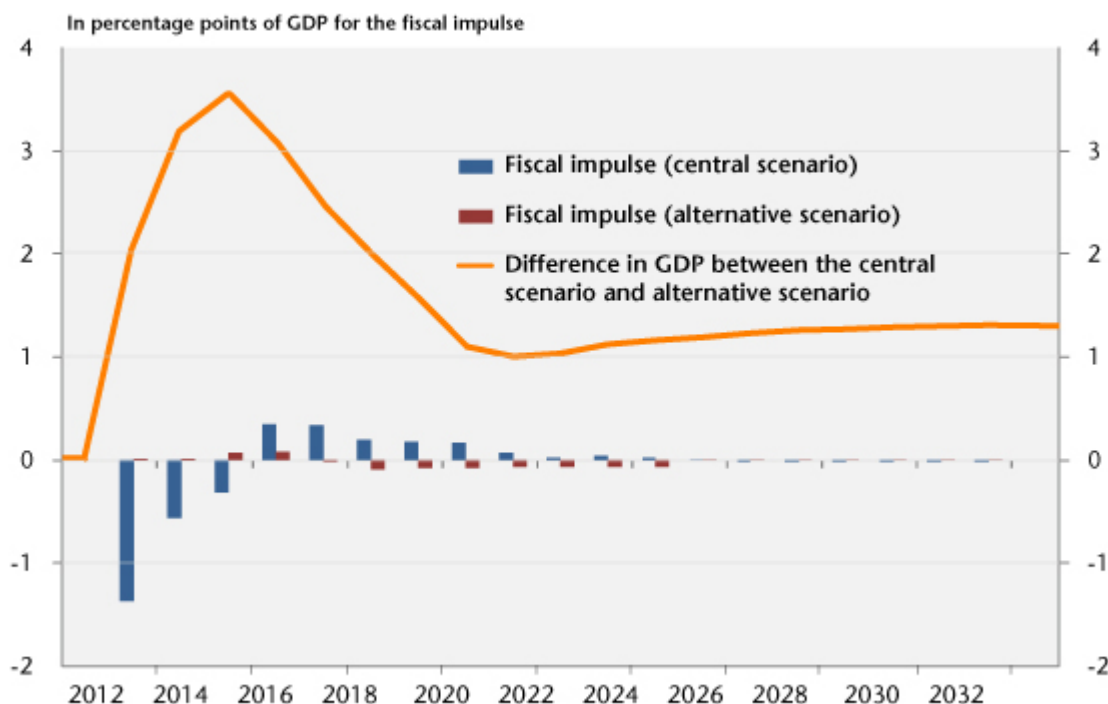
These adjustments are being undertaken in a very poor economic climate, which has been marked by austerity budgets from 2010 to 2012: growth in the euro zone will be -0.4% in 2012 and -0.3% in 2013. However, according to a series of recent theoretical and empirical studies[\[1\]](#), the fiscal multipliers turn upwards as the economic cycle heads downwards. In this context, the speed and magnitude of the fiscal adjustment is especially costly in terms of growth, and thus counter-productive in terms of the fiscal consolidation.[\[2\]](#) Encouraging a return to growth by easing the austerity would enable the economies of the euro zone to pull out of their recessionary spiral, which is marked by a steep rise in unemployment.

In order to develop this alternative strategy, we used the iAGS model to carry out simulations for the euro zone countries over a period of 20 years. These were conducted in two steps:

1. In our central scenario, we integrated the planned budget cuts announced by the various countries up to 2015. Starting from 2016, we calculated the fiscal impulses needed to achieve the 60% debt threshold by 2032, while limiting the size of these impulses to  $\pm 0.5$  GDP points per year. As shown in Figure 1 (central scenario), the structural adjustment carried out between 2010 and 2015 is significant enough in most countries to allow a relaxation of economic policy starting in 2016, while meeting the debt criterion by 2032.
2. For each country, we then decided on an alternative

budget strategy by staggering the reduction of the structural deficit over time. This strategy consists in starting in 2013 with the implementation of fiscal impulses of a more limited amount in absolute value than those announced by the current governments (maximum +/-0.5 GDP points per year), and doing this until the adjustment is sufficient to achieve the debt target of 60% of GDP by 2032. This strategy leads to more measured fiscal adjustment for the euro zone countries in difficulty and to slightly positive fiscal impulses in countries whose debt trajectory is in better shape (Germany, Finland, and Italy). For the zone as a whole, the fiscal impulse is almost zero in 2013 and 2014, with the bulk of the adjustment spread from 2017 to 2024.

**Figure 1. Fiscal impulses and difference in GDP between the central and alternative scenarios**



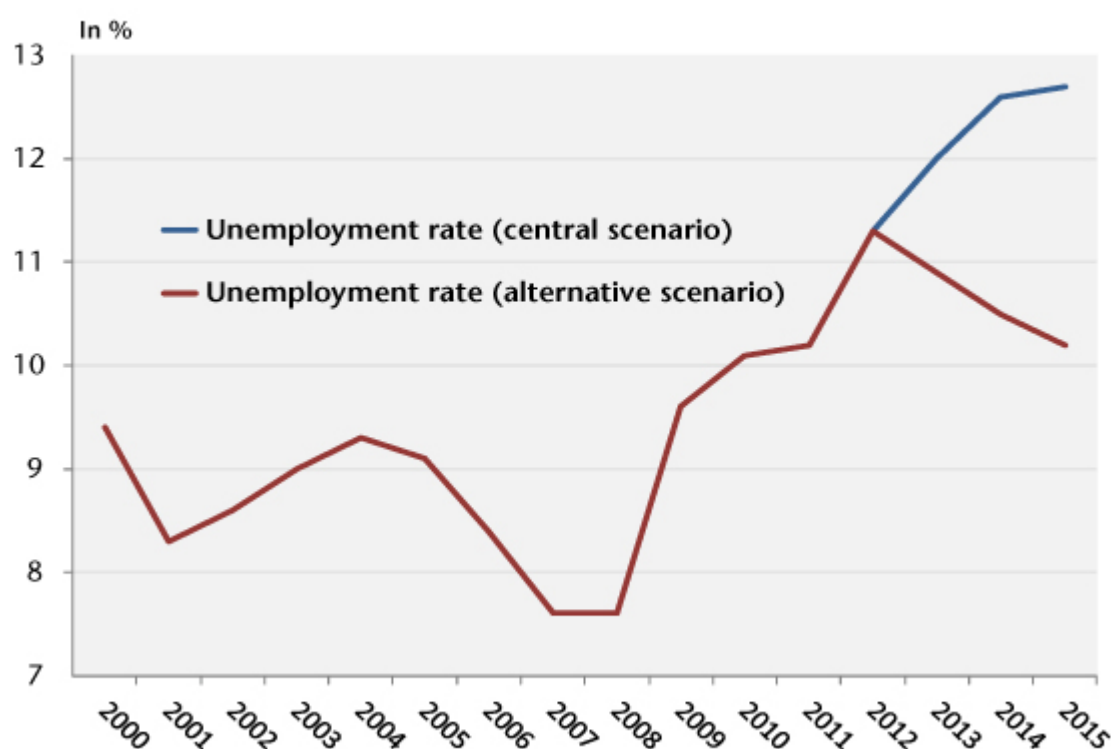
Source : iAGS, authors' calculation.

Figure 1 shows the difference in the level of GDP between the two scenarios. Limiting the size of the fiscal impulses helps to achieve a higher level of GDP and is

compatible with a debt target of 60% of GDP by 2032 (alternative scenario). The effectiveness of the fiscal consolidation is enhanced when it is being conducted in an environment that is less unfavourable to the economy. This strategy achieves the same debt target with a cumulative fiscal adjustment that is 50 billion euros less than in the central scenario.

According to our calculations, the alternative scenario would restore a 2% growth rate in the euro zone in 2013, compared with -0.3% if the planned fiscal policies are carried out. The revival of activity would boost the labour market and help to turn around the unemployment rate in 2013, with a decline to 10.2% in 2015, compared with 12.8% if the austerity policies are continued, representing 3 million fewer unemployed people in 2015.

**Graphique 2. Unemployment rate in the euro zone -  
Central and alternative scenarios**



Source: Eurostat data, iAGS simulation.

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[\[1\] A review of the recent literature on fiscal multipliers: size matters!](#)

# The euro zone in crisis

By [Catherine Mathieu](#) and [Henri Sterdyniak](#)

The 9th EUROFRAME Conference [1], which was held in Kiel on 8 June 2012, focused on economic policy issues in the European Union. The topic was “The euro zone in crisis: Challenges for monetary and fiscal policies”. [Issue 127 of the “Débats et Politiques” collection of the OFCE Revue](#) has published revised versions of twelve papers presented in the Conference[2], gathered in five themes: exchange rate imbalances, indicators of the debt crisis, budget rules, banking and financial issues, and strategies for resolving the crisis.

The analysis of the origins of the euro zone crisis and economic policy recommendations to get out of the crisis have been the subject of great debate among economists, which was illustrated in the EUROFRAME Conference. In the course of these articles, the reader will see several fault-lines:

– For some, it is the irresponsible policies of the South that are the cause of the imbalances: they have allowed the development of wage and property bubbles, while the Northern countries have been implementing virtuous policies of wage austerity and structural reform. The Southern countries thus need to adopt the North’s strategy and undergo a lengthy austerity cure. For others, the single currency has led to the development of twin opposing imbalances: this has led to under-valuing the economies of the North, which enabled them

to offset their excessive policies on wage and social austerity with excessive external surpluses, and it has allowed the persistence of the South's external deficits; this has resulted in the need for a controlled convergence, whereby recovery in the North facilitates the absorption of the South's external imbalances.

– Some argue that each country must implement policies that combine a strong reduction in public spending – to absorb the budget deficits and reduce the public debt burden – with structural reforms (liberalization of the markets for goods and services, deregulation of the labour market) in order to offset the depressive effect on the labour market. The financial markets have to be allowed to impose the necessary discipline on the countries. Others hold that the public deficits have to be tolerated as long as necessary to support economic activity, public debt needs to be guaranteed by the European Central Bank (ECB) to ensure that domestic interest rates converge at low rates, and an EU-wide growth strategy is needed (in particular to finance the investments required for the ecological transition).

– Some even believe that we must avoid any further extension of European solidarity, as it would enable some countries to put off the reforms needed, which would lead to persistent imbalances and thus to money creation and inflation. Others argue that errors have been made on economic policy since the inception of the euro zone, and that these have led to sharp disparities in the zone, which now need to be reduced by means of a coherent solidarity strategy. Europe is one big family and must demonstrate its solidarity and accept compromises to continue to live together.

– For some, ending the debt crisis of the euro zone countries requires the establishment of a fiscal union, which means the establishment of binding rules enshrined in the Fiscal Pact and a certain degree of fiscal federalism; the European Commission and Council should have a say on the fiscal

policies of the Member States. Others think that the Member States should have a degree of autonomy to practice the fiscal policy they choose; this is a matter of both democracy and economic efficiency: the economic situations of the different countries are too diverse to invoke a uniform fiscal policy; what is needed is the open coordination of economic policy, without rigid pre-established standards on public finances, with the aim of ensuring satisfactory growth and the winding down of external imbalances.

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[\[1\] EUROFRAME](#) is a network of European economic institutes, which includes: the DIW and IFW (Germany), WIFO (Austria), ETLA (Finland), OFCE (France), ESRI (Ireland), PROMETEIA (Italy), CPB (Netherlands), CASE (Poland), NIESR (United Kingdom).

[\[2\]](#) Ten of which are in English and two in French.